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Christian Conversions

TEXT

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Heinrich Böll Foundation

এবং EBONG

আলাপ ALAP

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CHRISTIAN CONVERSIONS
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The Heinrich Böll Foundation, affiliated with the Green Party and headquartered in Berlin, is a legally independent political foundation working in the spirit of intellectual openness. The foundation's primary objective is to support political education both within Germany and abroad, thus promoting democratic involvement, socio-political activism, and cross-cultural understanding. The Foundation also provides support for art and culture, science and research, and developmental cooperation. Its activities are guided by the fundamental political values of ecology, democracy, solidarity and non-violence. By way of its international collaboration with a large number of project partners, the foundation aims to strengthen ecological and civil activism on a global level, to intensify the exchange of ideas and experiences, and to keep our sensibilities alert for change.

The India Office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation began its activities in the middle of the year 2001. Since then alliances have been formed with Dalit and Dalit Muslim groups, secular collectives against various forms of communalism, forest workers and fisher-people networks, anti-mining and ecological democracy groups, and organizations acting against corporate crime. Many of these alliances have been built in the north and central parts of India, with a gradual diversification to other regions. HBF India encourages new forms of civil society assertions, like the Asia Social Forum in January 2003 and the World Dignity Forum in World Social Forum 2004. It also publishes critical works related to discrimination, peace, world summits and other geo-political concerns from time to time.

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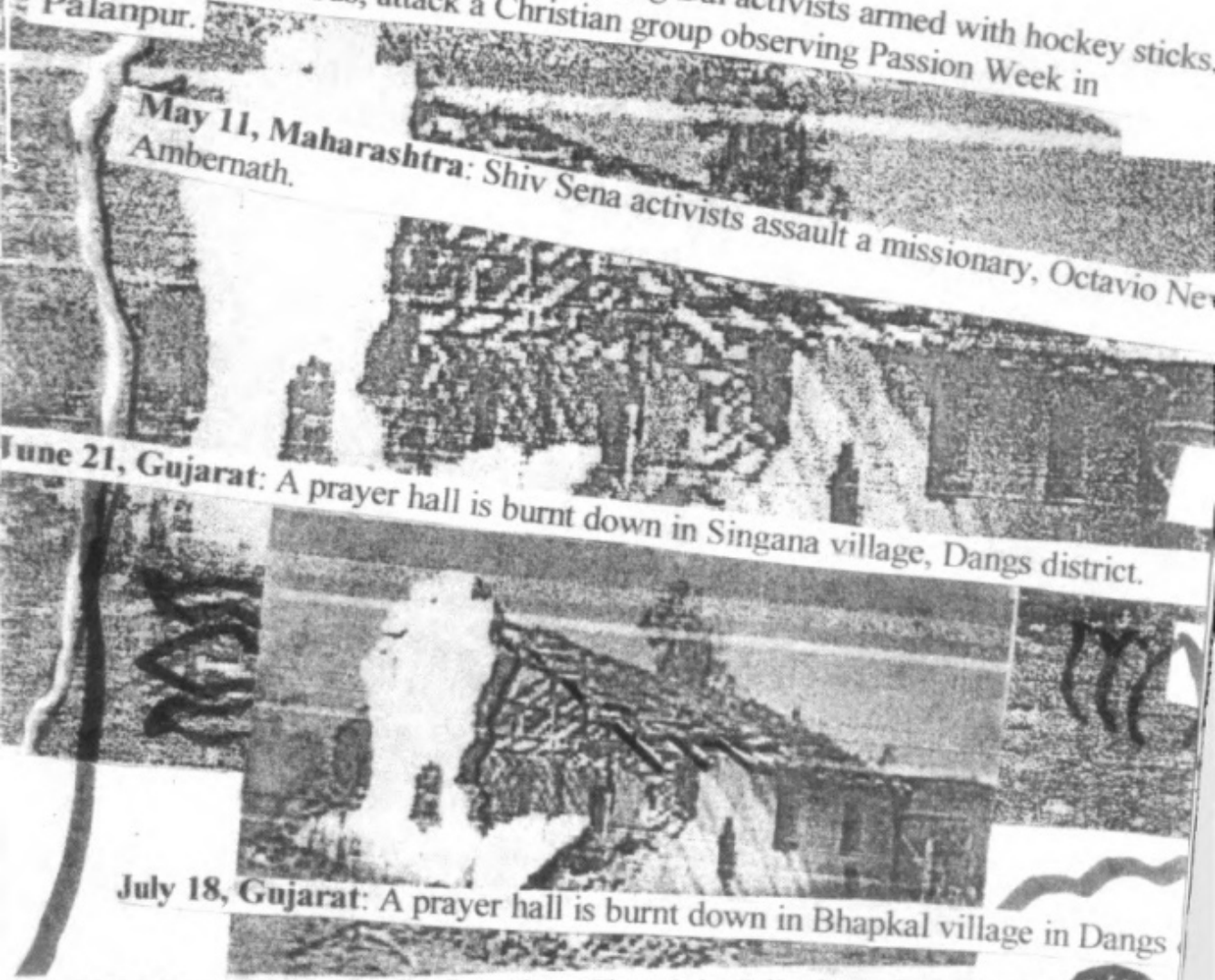
May 18, Gujarat: Hindu fundamentalists attack a Catholic priest, Xavi at Pilpilvada near Zankhav.

March 13, Maharashtra: Alleged Hindu fundamentalists attack Christian pilgrims in Khanvel.

March 16, Uttar Pradesh: Bajrang Dal activists attack a Christian meeting in Kanpur, resulting in injuries to several people and loss of property.

April 11, Gujarat: Alleged VHP-Bajrang Dal activists armed with hockey sticks, cricket bats and rods, attack a Christian group observing Passion Week in Palanpur.

May 11, Maharashtra: Shiv Sena activists assault a missionary, Octavio Ne Ambernath.



June 21, Gujarat: A prayer hall is burnt down in Singana village, Dangs district.

July 18, Gujarat: A prayer hall is burnt down in Bhapkal village in Dangs

June 16, Maharashtra: The St. Savariyar Church in Srilankapada slum in Mumbai's Malad suburb is demolished. Unauthorised Hindu structures are, however, left untouched.

July 23, Gujarat: Mobs allegedly led by a low-level revenue official adivasis at a prayer meeting in Borkhal village.

September 25, Madhya Pradesh: Nuns are raped at a Christian convent in Jhabua. Although specific culpability for the incident remains unclear, it came in the wake of the VHP-BJP's anti-Christian campaign.

March 2, Gujarat: People distributing leaflets about a Christian meeting at the Vadodara Polo Ground are attacked by Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini and VHP cad Among those injured is a pregnant woman, who is repeate

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A sustained programme of violent attacks on Christian missionaries is a new element in the history and tradition of Indian life. The campaign began in real earnest with Swami Ashimananda's 'reconversion' crusade among Christian tribal populations in Gujarat in 1997. This was followed by over a week of attacks on Christians in the Dang district of Gujarat (25 December–3 January), during which 24 churches and 3 schools were fully or partially destroyed while 9 Christian tribals suffered injuries.

The Swami is a member of the Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad, a subsidiary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and was associated with the Hindu Jagaran Manch. Prime Minister Vajpayee called for a national debate on conversions in January 1999. This implied that the act of conversion was a controversial and debatable one, and not a part of basic democratic rights. Following the appeal, the Shankaracharya of the Karveer peeth together with Swami Ashimananda organized a Dharmarakshan Samiti at Nasik where they 'reconverted' some tribal Christians and demanded that Christian missionaries leave tribal areas. 'Request them once, twice, thrice, and if they do not refrain from their activities, then take the next step,' they urged.

The violence against Christians spread rapidly from the Dang district to Surat and then to Orissa, Bihar and elsewhere. In Madhya Pradesh, weeks of arson and violence against churches, schools and missions preceded the rape of four nuns in Jhabua (September 1998). In January 1999, the Australian-born missionary Graham Stewart Staines and his two sons, aged seven and ten, were burned to death by a crowd that chanted 'Jai Bajrang Bali' in Manoharpur village, Orissa. The accused, Dara Singh, had apparently attended RSS shakhas, was intimate with the BJP and had borne the banner of the Bajrang Dal in earlier attacks. The international outcry

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put the Hindutva organizations on the defensive. But Vajpayee merely reiterated his appeal for a debate on conversions, even as he condemned the incident. By doing so he merely deflected guilt away from the murders to the propagation of Christianity—implying, had Staines tried to convert, murder was justifiable.

There is no doubt that this is an orchestrated campaign by different Hindutva organizations to make religious intolerance a part of social life. Most people have been critical of the violence and public organs such as the media and political parties have by and large condemned it. Yet the violence has continued unabated. Thus *The Hindustan Times* of 1 November 2001 collated the figures provided by various state police departments which indicate that the number of attacks on Christians had risen sharply from 27 in 1997 to 216 in 2000 (with 37 incidents in the first three months of 2001). States where attacks have taken place include Gujarat, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. While spectacular incidents like the Staines murder have been relatively few, other 'everyday' acts of terror like disruption of prayer meetings, gospel readings, destruction of Bibles and damages to Christian symbols, icons and churches, forcible tonsure of converts continue unabated.

The continued violence may not only be due to ideological fanaticism. It may well derive from the calculated assessment of Hindutva campaigners that large sections of the public (including the many who are not communal and intolerant) may condemn the violence and still harbour a deep suspicion of missionaries at the same time. Popular beliefs that missionaries are foreigners inducted into our country by the British and now by 'western' powers, that they seduce the poor with money, indulge in fraud and coercion, are all too common. It may be remarked that these are not simply unthinking, inno-

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cent biases. They also have an unconscious assumption—that India is essentially a Hindu country and Christians are really foreigners, social 'others' and aliens whom it is only natural to suspect. It is an assumption that overlaps with the belief of Hindutva activists that any ideology which originates outside the country remains forever foreign. Whatever is foreign in origin is doomed to be alien and harmful. The Hindutva adherents build on this assumption to suggest that the adherents of these 'foreign' belief systems should be given, for all practical purposes, second class citizenship.

The overlap in assumptions can be seen ironically in the fact that many of those who condemned the Staines killing went on to say defensively that Staines was not engaged in conversions—as if the murder would have been acceptable if he had been proselytizing. It is this overlap between popular suspicion of missionaries and Hindutva ideology that encourages Hindutva activists to perpetrate one act of outrage after the other, secure in the belief that there may be public censure of the violence, but that deep down even those who reprimand them may sympathize with their motivation, And in time, the public may come to accept the violence because their attitude to it is not one of unqualified condemnation in the first place. There is then a great deal at stake in harbouring misconceptions about missionaries. This book seeks to address some of these.

QUESTION. Christianity does not have any roots in our culture. It is a foreign religion from the West.

RESPONSE: It was Swami Vivekananda who pointed out that Christianity was an Eastern religion. Christianity came to India much before it spread to England, France, Germany and other countries of the West. It first struck roots in Kerala about 2000 years ago, when there was no Christian power ruling the state.

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Clearly there was no question of state imposition or compulsion. The Syrian Christian Church now provides one of the richest instances of an unbroken Indian tradition. Today about 3 per cent of our country's people consist of Christians and they are scattered all over. In many places Christian saints have become local cults. For instance, it is common to see pictures of Mother Teresa, a contemporary saint, placed next to those of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Ma Kali and others on the dashboards of Calcutta buses (a place normally reserved by the staff for the worship of gods and goddesses).

QUESTION. But hasn't Christianity been a tool of Western imperialism? What about the way the British used missionaries to convert Hindus?

RESPONSE: It is true that Europeans have used proselytization in some parts of the world as a way of consolidating their hold over those areas. This happened in some parts of Latin America. But British colonialism operated on different principles in India. The British were never more than a tiny minority ruling over a massive population. They could ill afford popular disaffection which would threaten what they were really interested in doing, that is, in extracting revenue and wealth on a regular basis. The colonial regime was not interested in mass conversions, for conversions stirred anxieties among their colonized subjects and threatened the peace and stability required by the administration. The military also disapproved, for it was nervous about the impact of missionary activity on its sepoys.

Consequently, colonial authorities actively discouraged missionary activity. In late eighteenth century Baptist missionary activity was disallowed in British-ruled Bengal and they had to shift their activities to Srirampur, a Danish colony. Missionaries in British-ruled areas were not allowed to own prop-

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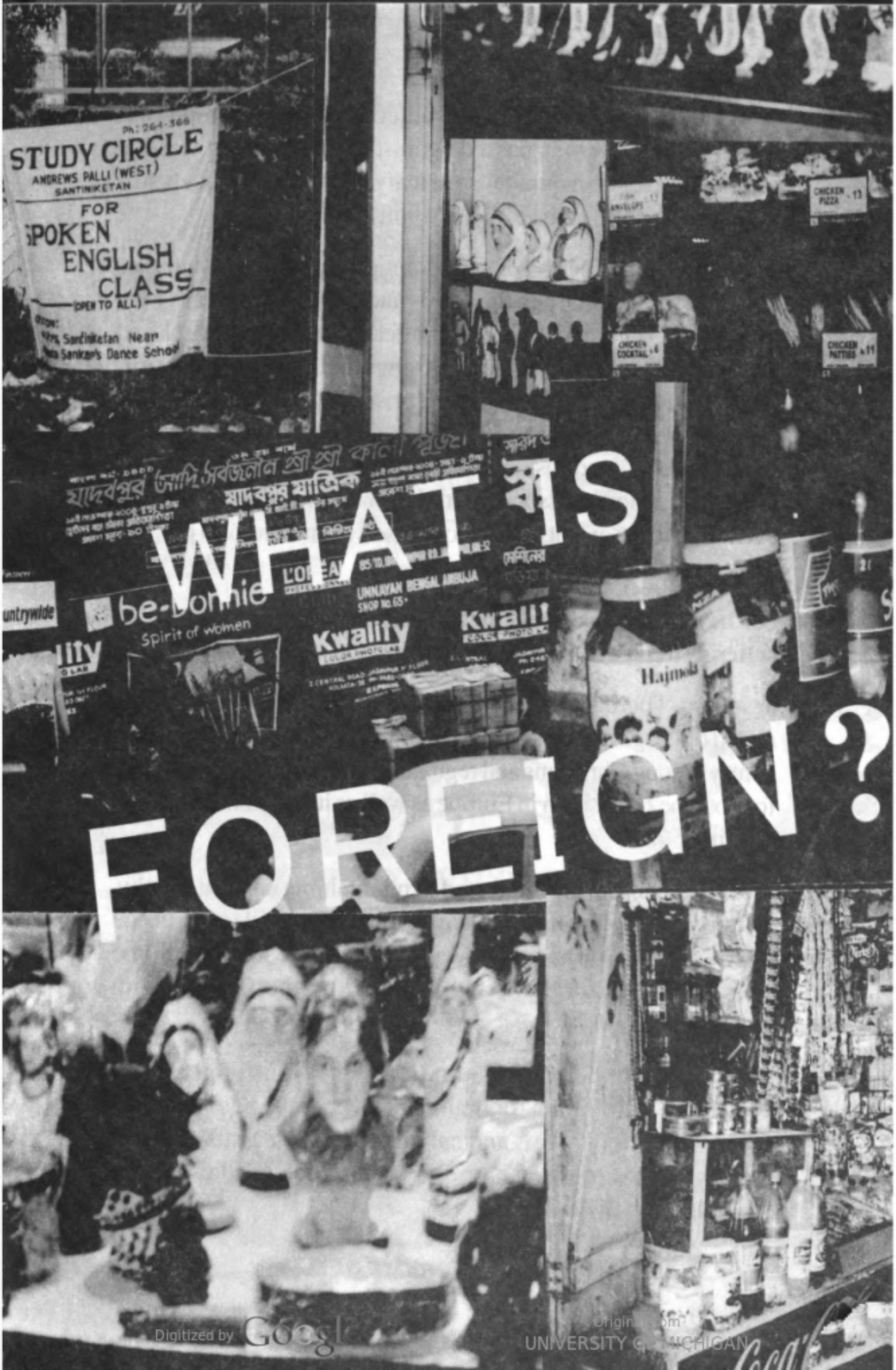

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erty and they were rigorously subjected to censorship laws: the first such law was passed against them! So deep was the colonial suspicion of missionary activity that the authorities held it to be responsible for the Vellore Mutiny in 1806.

There was a brief period of collaboration between missionaries and the administration in the 1830s and the 1840s. But after the events of 1857 in which religious disaffection among sepoys played an important role, one of the first things that the British government did after suppressing the Uprising was to issue Queen Victoria's Proclamation in 1858. This guaranteed toleration of all religious beliefs and customs of her Indian subjects. After this, the Government firmly dissociated itself from missionary activity and even went to the extent of distancing itself from all reform projects for its non-Christian subjects.

QUESTION. And what about the Inquisition in Goa and the terrible suffering it caused Hindus?

RESPONSE. There's a misconception that the Inquisition was directed only against Hindus. It was primarily aimed at rooting out heresy among Christians and regulating their conduct. This is true for both the Inquisition in Europe as well as its version initiated in Goa in 1560.

The Portuguese were interested in maintaining caste hierarchy. The privileges of brahmans were retained both inside and outside the Church at Goa and work was divided on caste lines. Some powerful Jesuit priests tried to integrate the Church with brahmanism.

In seventeenth century Madurai, Robert Nobili openly expressed his admiration for brahmanical scriptures, maintained purity-pollution taboos and called the Bible a lost Veda! Although other Portuguese priests criticized him, the Vatican

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ROYAL PROCLAMATION-1858
Tolerance
All Religious Belief
dissociate his All Missionaries
All customs
distancing from all reforms
SEPOY MUTINY OF 1857
Firmly relying Ourselves on the Truth of Christianity and acknowledging with gratitude the Solace of Religion, We disclaim alike the right and the Desire to impose our Conviction on any of Our Subjects
We decla it to be Our Royal Will and Pleasu that none in any wise favoured, no molestec or disquiete by reason their Faitl or Observanc
Tantya Tope
Rani Laxmibai
Nana Saheb

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supported Nobili's policy of *accomodatio* or accommodation.

It is true that the Portuguese tried to put Christianity at the service of the State. There are instances of clashes and massacres initiated by Portuguese policy from which the Muslims suffered more than the Hindus. It may be remembered that Islam in medieval times was often thought to be the main enemy of Christianity. It is interesting that the Portuguese model was not followed outside Goa.

The Story of Huchi

Huchi was a young girl from the Karnataka region who converted sometime in the 1870s. But the courts nullified her conversion because she was a minor and was forced to marry a Hindu husband against her will. Still she remained undaunted. After attaining majority she secretly converted again. But she could not dissolve her marriage, since women who had been married before their conversion were denied access to the Native Convert Marriage Dissolution Act. In Hindu society she was declared an outcast since she had been baptized. Yet this did not prevent her husband from full access to her body. So he slept with her, but did not eat the food she cooked. She was forced to live in a marriage to which she did not consent and was treated like an unpaid sex worker.

QUESTION. Even if one concedes that the colonial state was nervous about missionary activity, isn't it true that they favoured Christianity over other religions?

RESPONSE. Not really. Let's look at the provisions of colonial law that would give a concrete indication of how much the British sought to downgrade its non-Christian subjects. Throughout the colonial period Hindus and Muslims were legally regulated by the Dharmashastras and the Shariat in

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matters relating to 'inheritance, marriage, caste and other religious usages and institutions.' Further, a person below a minimum age could not be converted and the courts often looked upon those who converted under that age as people engaged in abduction. Adult converts required parental consent for marriage on the grounds that consensual marriage was not permissible in Hinduism. Even when the wives of the converted demanded that Christian personal laws should cover them, the courts refused them that right and subjected them to the Hindu personal law. In other words the colonial state sought to preserve and privilege the inherited identity of the convert over the one she had chosen. It was only in 1850 that matters were partially mended by an Act that protected the rights of inheritance to ancestral property, which applied also to those who had abandoned Christianity.

The British, moreover, maintained very good relations with Hindu and Muslim religious institutions and patronized them because of their interest in maintaining social order. At no point in time did the British curb the power and property of the non-Christian establishments and leadership. There were many divisions between the administrators and the missionaries. Upper class British administrators often sneered at missionaries, many of whom came from lower middle class backgrounds. Further they were jealous of the authority that missionaries could wield over their Indian followers. Missionaries settled down for longer stretches in the remote hinterland and remained in close touch with local people whereas European officers were a remote and distant presence to most Indians. Interestingly, on occasions when missionaries were attacked, the colonial police tended to keep aloof. When the local brahmans of Travancore attacked missionaries and prevented them from taking out a procession, Charles Trevelyan, the pro-evangelist Governor of Madras roundly censured the missionaries!

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CHRISTIANS: ARE THEY ALL THE SAME?

Normally (and we have done it so far) people refer to missionaries as if they were all the same. However, as we all know, Christianity does not have a single church and naturally the missionaries had different belief structures and forms of proselytization. They also had separate ways of relating to the colonial state. The official loyalty of the British administration was to the Anglican Church. However, till the end of the eighteenth century it was the Catholic Church (that faced discrimination in England and was denied equal rights of worship there) which was the main agent of conversion. In the nineteenth century it was the German missionaries who were the most dynamic proselytizers till the 1830s. The British colonial state deeply distrusted both. In the north-east, the American Baptists, who were unconnected with the colonial state, initiated conversions.

There were basic differences even among the Catholics, such as the one that existed between the missionary organizations controlled by the Portuguese government, the *Padroado*, and those by the Vatican, the *De Propoganda Fide*.

Vast disparities in understanding existed between missionaries vis-à-vis caste and Hinduism. While the majority condemned idolatry, some important missionaries held a very favourable opinion of caste. Abbe Dubois found the caste system the 'happiest effort at self-legislation.' We have already encountered Robert Nobili's deep regard for brahmanism. While some missionaries campaigned very hard to remove low caste disabilities, other churches maintained caste amongst themselves. So we see that far from a missionary conspiracy, there was no uniform or concerted effort made by missionaries in a specific direction.

Very often, missionaries feared Islam as their most formidable

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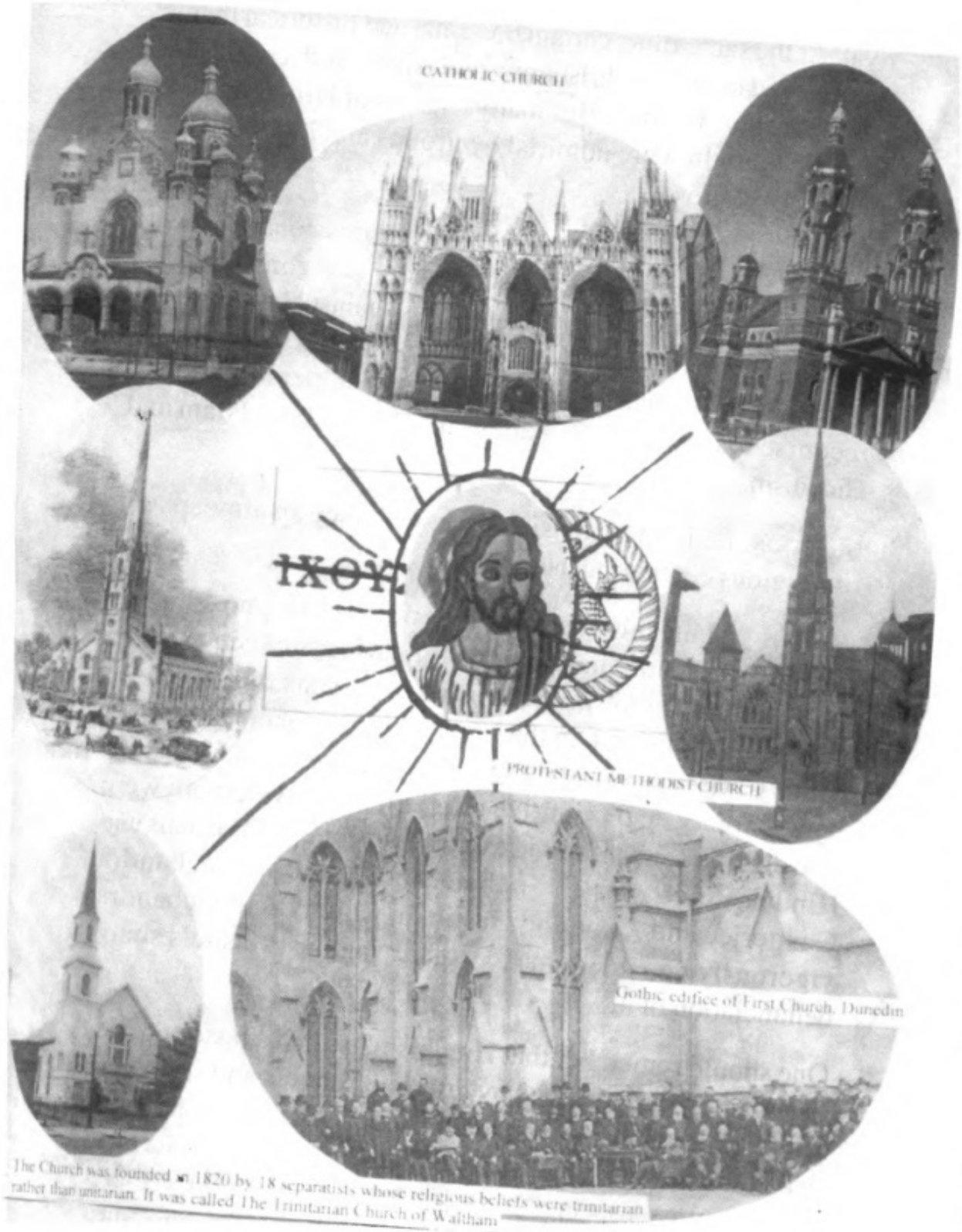

The Church was founded in 1820 by 18 separatists whose religious beliefs were trinitarian rather than unitarian. It was called The Trinitarian Church of Waltham

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rival. At the same time, certain doctrinal and historical themes were shared between Christianity and Islam. Both condemned the idolatry of Hindus. But many aspects of Hindu philosophy and thought were admired by groups and individuals of these other faiths.

In general it may be remarked that for the missionaries it was not Hinduism that was seen as the main antagonist, but Islam. Common to missionary campaigns against Hinduism was their criticism of image worship. It is true that in their criticisms the missionaries were not always temperate and took recourse to caricature and abuse in talking about Islam and Hinduism.

QUESTION. Didn't the missionaries introduce an atmosphere of religious contentiousness in our country?

RESPONSE. Many missionaries abused Hinduism and other religions, and made them targets for caricature. But there is ample evidence to show that spokespersons of other religions paid them back in the same coin. Dayanand Saraswati called Christ the 'illiterate son of a carpenter' and Christianity a 'barbaric and primitive religion.' However, there were also dignified and informed exchanges between Christians and Hindus. Such was the debate between Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Reverend Hastie, in which Bankimchandra vigorously defended image worship against Hastie's sharp denunciation of it.

One should remember that Hinduism has had a history of debates, often bitter, waged by different schools and sects over philosophical and religious ideas. Indeed, all religions have had debates within themselves and between each other. In the nineteenth century, especially in north India, there were three-cornered public debates on doctrine and dogma among Muslims, Christians and Hindus or Arya Samajis. Debaters were

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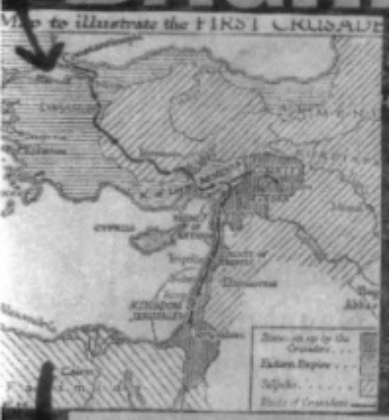
PINPOINTIN(BAGHDAD

U.S. strikes focus on Saddam's immense presidential complex in the center of a city of 5 million



AL-SALAM PALACE This new palace was built over the site of a Republican Guard headquarters that was destroyed during the first Gulf War.

Baghdad Fairgrounds

Intelligence Services headquarters

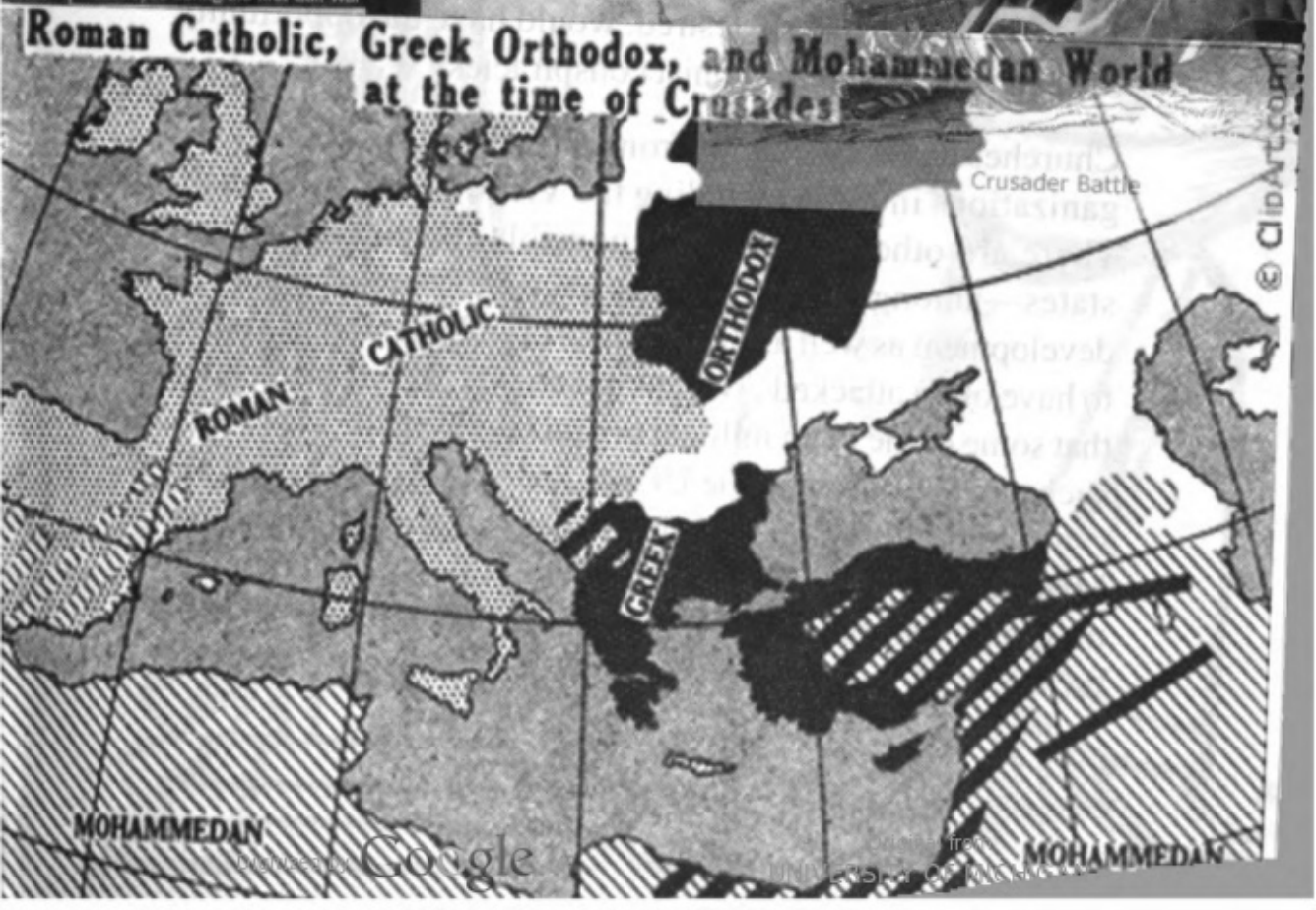
Zaura Park

al-Harithiyah

1938

ADOLF HITLER

Hitler was the to be selecte evil only grew several years. Hitler's ruthl



required to know one another's faith and religious texts; they agreed about what constituted good and bad arguments and politeness and respect were seen as desirable conditions for public argument.

QUESTION. Even if all these things that happened in the past were true, it is undeniable today that the Church is fomenting movements for secession in the north-east.

RESPONSE. Seven states (excluding Sikkim) make up the north-eastern states of India. Of these only three—Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram—have a Christian majority. It may be of interest to note that it is very difficult for outsiders to get into many of these states. An Inner Line Permit is required for Indians and foreigners alike to visit Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh that is provided by the Home Ministry. Even tourists from other parts of India can be—and often are—checked any time in Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur. When there are such strict restrictions and where the Home Ministry exercises direct control, it is impossible that foreigners, even if they had so desired, would have the opportunity to engage in dark secessionist conspiracies.

Churches do receive funds from abroad, but so do many organizations in India including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. There are other problems responsible for unrest in these states—among which the tardy pace and skewed nature of development as well as the presence of Indian military known to have often attacked civilians are crucial. It may be recalled that some of the main militant organizations in the north-east, such as the Bodos and the ULFA, are not Christian. Just because the faith of vast numbers of people in Nagaland and Mizoram happen to be Christian does not mean that the militant organizations of the north-east are directly inspired by the Church.

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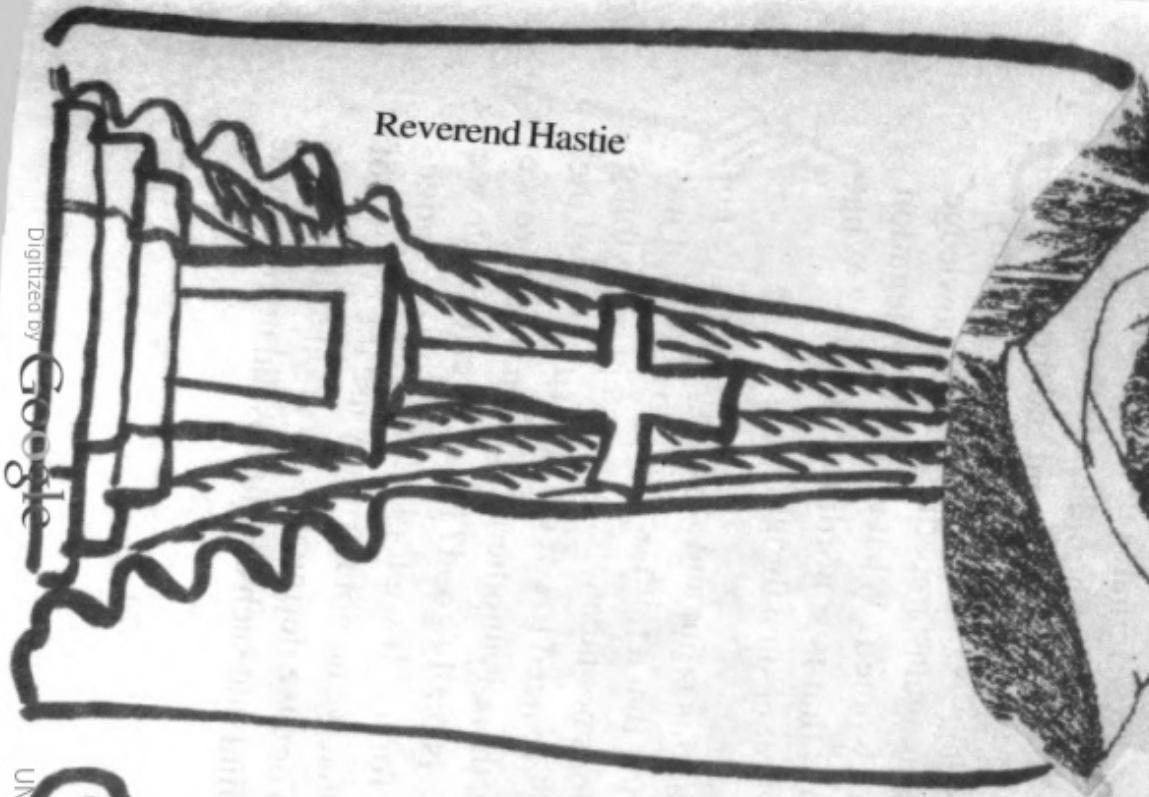

Reverend Hastie

Bankimchandra Chatterjee

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Underlying a great deal of the suspicions and doubts about Christian missionaries and indeed about Indian Christianity in general, is the belief—assiduously propagated by Hindutva thinkers and ideologues—that any idea or faith that has not originated in the boundaries of modern India is foreign to our culture. It does not and cannot ever belong to us. And therefore—to narrate the next step in the argument—the adherents of such beliefs as Christianity (as well as Islam and Socialism) can never feel that they belong to our nation. In other words, they become perpetual objects of suspicion for those whose faiths have originated in the land called India.

Clearly we need to closely examine this assumption that a belief belongs to us only if it originates in our country. One could begin with some questions. Should we feel obliged to defend the discriminations of the caste system and the practice of untouchability because they originated in our country? What about the injunctions against imparting Vedic knowledge to the low castes and to women? What about the relegation of women to a position that is subordinate to men? What about implying several other such things?

We may turn around at this point and say, 'No, no, that's not what we meant.' Saying that a faith belongs to us only if it is born in our country does not mean that we accept everything that originated here. We need to sift good heritage from the bad. To this defence, there is another objection. How are we so sure that the good is really good? By what criteria do we judge what is good for us? If we look closely at our judgements we will find that we do not normally use the criteria of national origins. When we define what is good and what is bad, we often may find that such definitions did not originate

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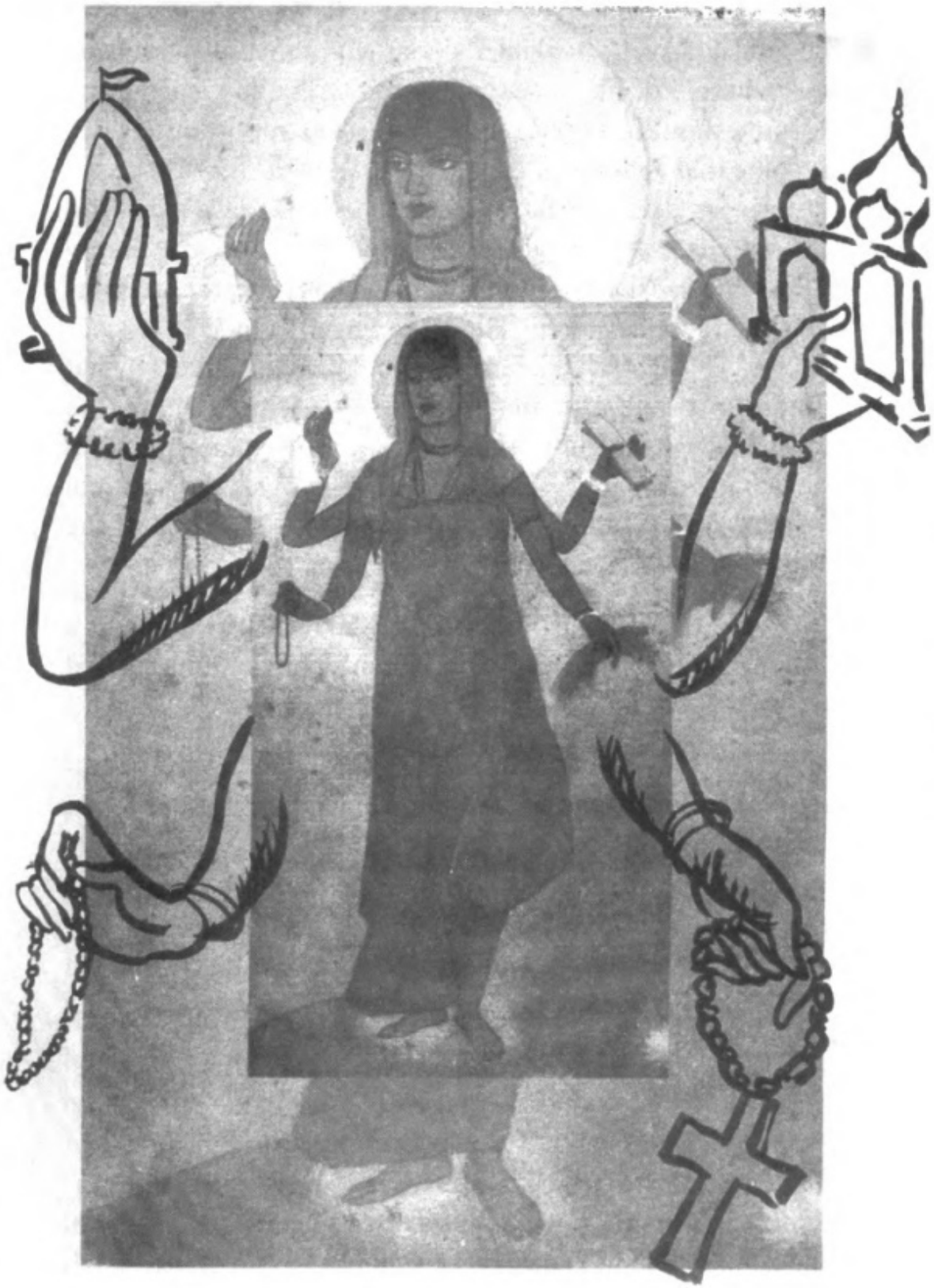

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in our soil but came to be evolved here through prolonged cultural and intellectual interactions with values that originate elsewhere. For instance, when we say that low castes and women should be given equal rights and opportunities, we assume that egalitarianism and social justice should be the criteria for judging what is good for us. But these ideals did not originate in India alone, and certainly not in the deeply hierarchical vision of brahmanism, which is the preferred version of Hinduism among Hindutva activists. Indeed, it is our anchoring in a broad universalist belief in human freedom that makes us proud of being a democracy; if we stuck to the logic of choosing only 'Indian' institutions then we should have had a monarchy! Indeed, Golwalkar was very critical of democracy and asserted that monarchy was one of the authentically Indian forms of governance.

QUESTION. Even if one grants that this may be true, it seems a little beside the point. After all, aren't conversions carried out by bribery and fraud?

RESPONSE. If by bribery one means offering prospects of material self-improvement, yes, there may well be instances of this. But this phenomenon should also make us reflect on the state of poverty and deprivation in our country that could make people change their fundamental beliefs. Unfortunately most people who condemn the role of material incentives in conversions are indifferent, if not actually hostile, to addressing questions of poverty and social inequality.

But there is also a fundamental problem with the insinuation that conversions are the result of bribing. To say that millions converted and remained converted only because of bribery is simply impossible and betrays a disrespect for the people of the country and their capacity to choose their own beliefs. It

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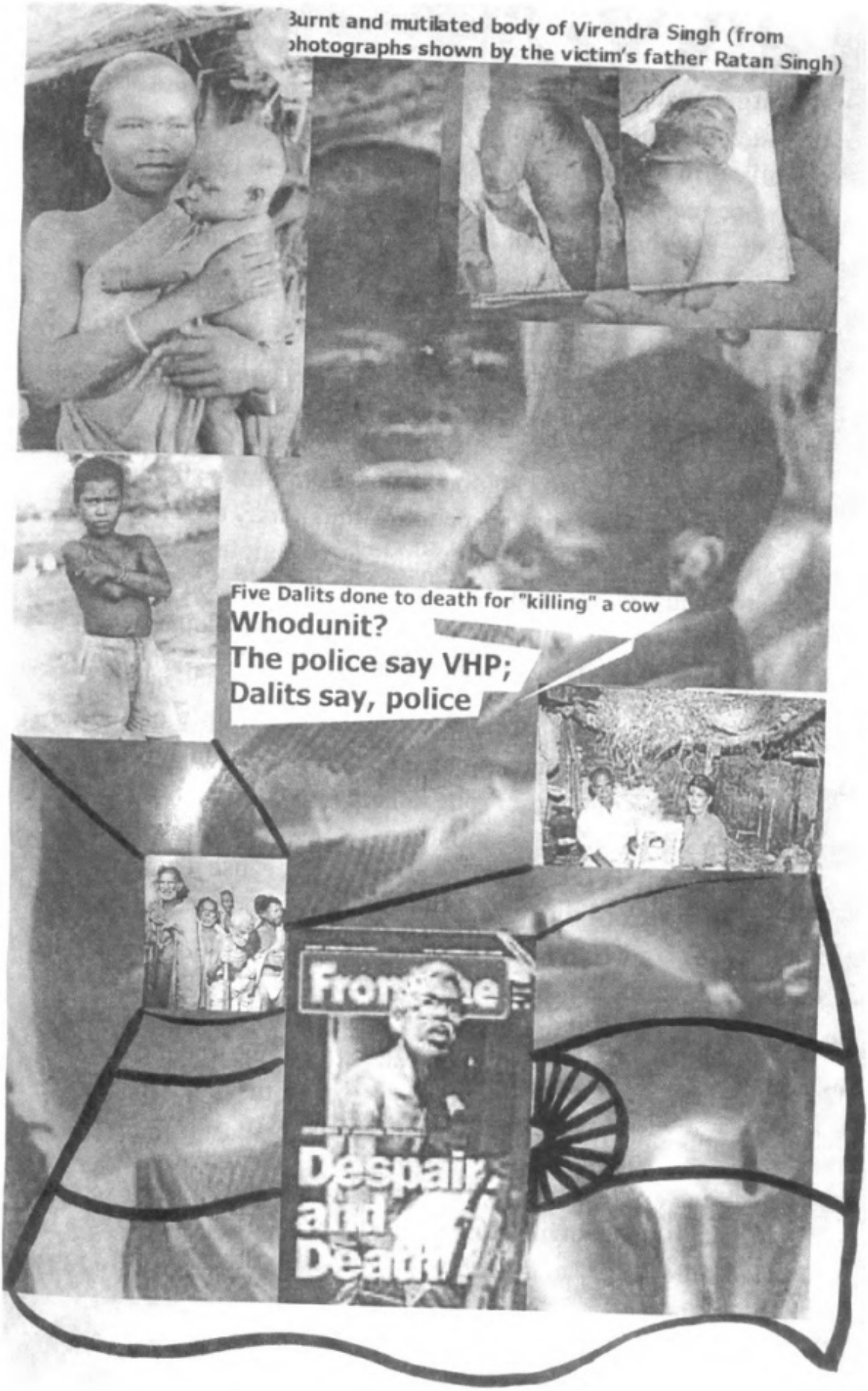
Burnt and mutilated body of Virendra Singh (from photographs shown by the victim's father Ratan Singh)
Five Dalits done to death for "killing" a cow
Whodunit?
The police say VHP;
Dalits say, police
Despair and Death

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is to argue that poor people have no genuine spiritual motive or understanding for any independence of thinking. We may equally turn the argument around and say that upper class and upper caste Hindus remain Hindu because of the privileges they derive from that.

Conversion is not an easy act; converts often have to face hostility and social boycott from the original community. For instance, in a Barisal village in united Bengal in 1846, Hindu zamindars seized the lands, implements, cattle and even clothes of the families of Christian converts and destroyed their huts. There has to be good reasons for risking and paying such costs. For religious people—and it may be remembered that a great many of our people are religious—faith is a fundamental element of life. To change one's basic beliefs requires, therefore, immense conviction since it also means looking at life and its meanings differently.

It is true, of course, that people convert not simply on the basis of doctrines alone, but also because the rituals, practices and ideas of another religion may give them and their children self-confidence and a sense of being empowered. This is especially relevant of caste society because it has systematically discriminated against low castes and women and continues to do so today. It is precisely because of these reasons that there have been mass conversions of Dalits to Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. The process continues till this day because of the inflexible attitudes of the upper castes to either lessening their ritual and social status or to sharing their monopoly over material privileges.

Given the context of conversions, it is more productive to ask what it was that missionaries did that attracted disadvantaged and socially marginal people to their faith.

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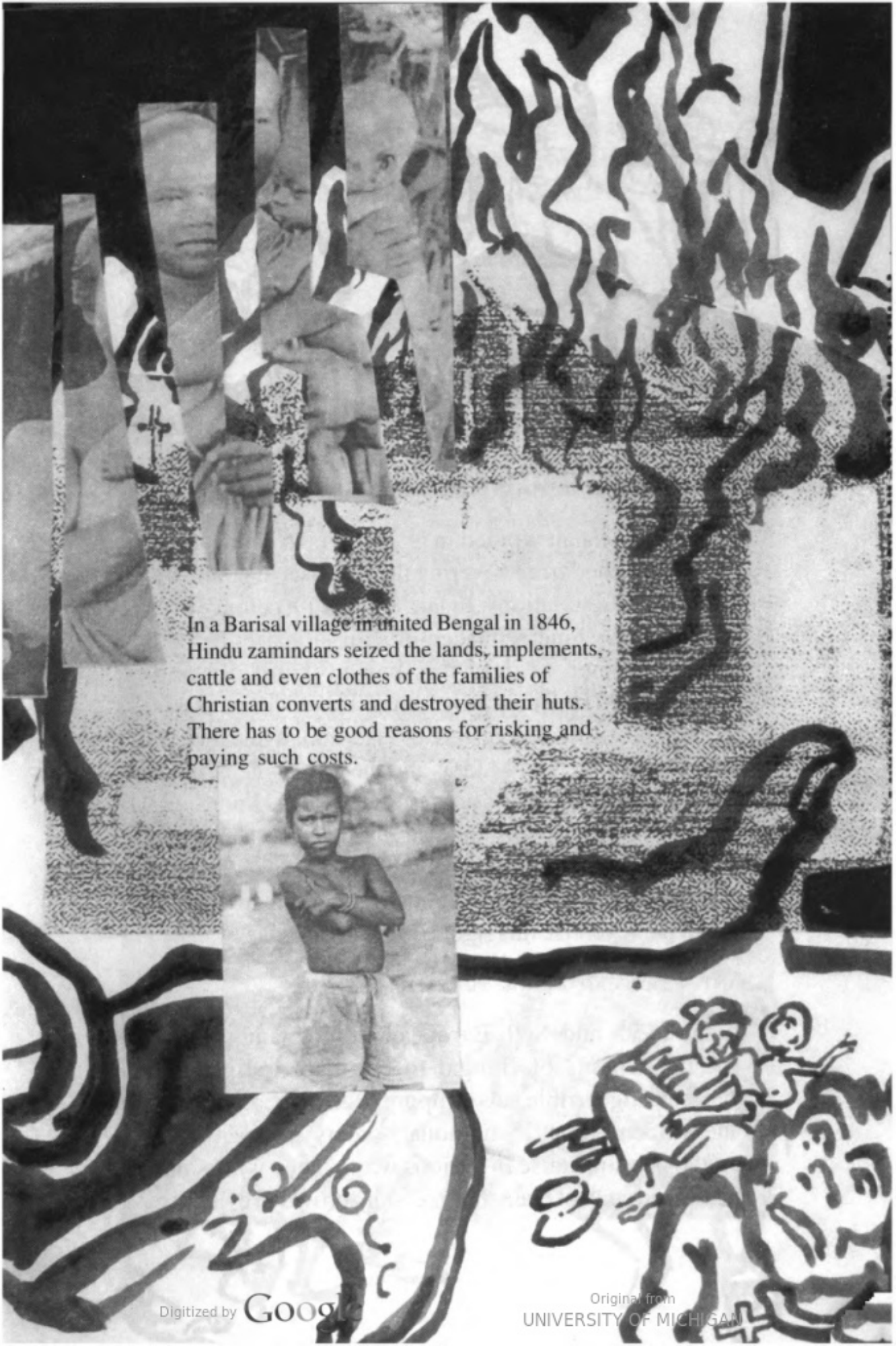
In a Barisal village in united Bengal in 1846, Hindu zamindars seized the lands, implements, cattle and even clothes of the families of Christian converts and destroyed their huts. There has to be good reasons for risking and paying such costs.

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SHANAR BREAST CLOTH CONTROVERSY

Low caste Shanar women in many parts of south India were prohibited from covering their breasts in public by upper caste regulations. In late eighteenth century and again in early nineteenth century, missionaries helped Shanar women to defy this ban in Tinevelly and Travancore. The Hindu kingdom of Travancore was extremely hostile to this gesture of assertion, while the colonial government of Madras and the government of India also directed the missionaries to respect Hindu customs. Eventually only the Christian converts among Shanars were allowed to wear the breast cloth, although missionaries continued to encourage other low caste women to exercise this right.

ANTI-EUROPEAN INDIGO PLANTER AGITATION

In the 1850s and1860s European indigo planters were forcing tenants of Bengal to cultivate indigo and perpetrating terrible acts of oppression on peasant men and women. About 25 missionary orders in Bengal took up the peasant cause in various ways. They wrote and petitioned against planter oppression, provided evidence

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against the planters to the Indigo Commission, lobbied senior government officials and politicians in Bengal and England. The Reverend James Long got a Bengali anti-indigo play translated into English, for which the court sentenced him. He is still remembered with affection and immense respect in Bengal.

AGAINST LANDLORDISM

Through the Permanent Settlement Act in 1793, the British gave near complete powers to the landlords to evict tenants and control their rent. Christian missionaries lobbied with the British Parliament and the colonial government for pro-tenant legal reforms. Their efforts were very important in shaping the Bengal Tenancy Amendment of 1859, while the Tenancy Act of 1908 in Chhotanagpur was largely due to their initiative. Missionaries in Pondicherry helped agricultural labourers who were beaten up by landlords in a court case. For their part, landlords were deeply suspicious of converts since they felt that converts were less amenable to their exactions. In the late 1820s cultivators and fishermen of a village south of Calcutta were fined ten rupees each and beaten with shoes by their landlord for turning Christian.

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QUESTION. Well, the missionaries may have helped some weaker sections, but what did they do for our culture besides trying to replace it with theirs?

RESPONSE. That missionaries are purveyors of a foreign culture is an obsession that makes people forget their contribution to education and to the development of vernacular languages, as well as to other fields such as that of public health (some of the best and cheapest hospitals are still run by them). Missionary schools popularized education among low castes and women, going against the grain of upper caste prejudices in doing so. Some leaders of the low caste movement, such as Jyotirao Phule of Maharashtra, were taught by them. Also we must not overlook the many excellent schools and colleges they run in cities and towns which continue to produce vast numbers of highly educated citizens (who incidentally do not normally convert!) in addition to providing a standard and model of excellence which other educational foundations seek to emulate. Missionaries also played an important role in gender reforms. They were active in the anti-Sati campaign.

Missionaries have contributed greatly to the development of regional cultures. They played a crucial role in developing vernacular print and prose writing in the nineteenth century. While they promoted these with the aim of proselytizing, missionaries were far more successful in generally contributing to the development of vernacular print. In Tamil Nadu, Robert Caldwell, a missionary, wrote a comparative grammar of the Dravidian language in1856. In general, missionaries played a key role in developing Dravidian self-consciousness which is one of the bases of the modern Tamil culture. Earlier, in 1800, the Serampore Baptist missionaries led by William Carey set up the Baptist Mission Press which printed not just Christian books but also texts of other religions. They published one of the earliest vernacular

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The Many interventions of Reverend The James Long

Reverend Long was a multi-faceted person and was involved in a variety of projects. He drew up catalogues of Bengali newspapers and publications, urging the government to be more responsive to Indian opinion. He was also deeply involved in promoting both Sanskrit and Bengali. Long abandoned the model of an elitist educa-

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tion with its hope that the fruits of education would filter down to the illiterate, and proposed instead mass vernacular elementary education. Long's dedication to the gospel did not come in the way of his respect for other religions. 'The more I see of Hindus,' he remarked, 'the more I like them.'

Coming from an Irish Protestant family, he had had direct experience of unemployment and poverty among Irish weavers. It was this background of empathy which probably went into his deep involvement with the 'poor ryots and fishermen' who populated the landscape of Bengal he loved so much.

Long identified completely with the campaign against the oppression of indigo planters in Bengal. Already from the 1850s missionaries had been active in that area against landlord and planter oppression, helping out in the campaigns against them by some Indian journalists. Long wrote against the complicity between the British magistrate and the European planter. Further, he got *Nil Darpan* (by Dinabandhu Mitra, 1861) translated into English, for which he had to face the wrath of the planters who lodged a libel case against him. He went to jail having accepted responsibility for translating the play although it was actually Michael Madhusudan Dutt who had translated it.

Long's contribution is embedded in popular memory. A ditty on the Indigo Revolt saw him as one of its chief actors: 'The indigo monkeys have been ruining golden Bengal,' it said, 'Harish [the editor of *Hindoo Patriot* Harish Mukherjee who was running a campaign against the planters] died before his time. Long has been sent to jail.'

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newspapers in the country, the *Samachar Darpan*. The role of the converts is no less important. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a Christian convert, is an inspirational figure for Bengali culture: he renounced a career in English poetry and chose instead to write in Bengali. He laid the foundations of modern Bengali poetry as well as writing some of its great dramatic satires.

QUESTION. Well, these points may be worth remembering. But surely this is not the whole picture. Are we not, in our enthusiasm to criticize Hindutva, painting a far too rosy picture of missionary activity?

RESPONSE. Yes, there is always a danger of forgetting awkward details about the victim when its oppressor is so systematically merciless and powerful. As we have seen, missionaries could be intolerant of other religions. Foreign missionaries were also sometimes racist in their attitudes to Indians. But the Indian converts also resisted them. In nineteenth century Bengal, Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerji fought vehemently against unequal salaries that were given to whites and Indians for the same job.

Converts were not just instruments and creatures of the missionaries. They had their own will and version of their new faith. Pandita Ramabai, the great Maharashtrian spokesperson of Christianity, developed her own understanding of Christianity which clashed sharply with the ideas of the Christian order to which she belonged. In general, we should examine conversions by not only looking at what the missionaries did, but also by seeing how the converts developed, contradicted, changed and continued, the work of the missionaries.

QUESTION. But doesn't the very idea of conversion smack of intolerance? After all, Hinduism is a religion that does not convert others.

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Over 300 Christians have been converted in the last few months, sources said. The converts were required to undergo a fire ritual, fast, bathe in a pond and chant Hindu prayers.
INDIA
20
SWAMI SHRADDHANAND
November 11, Gujarat: Hindu fundamentalists force residents of Daghunia village near the Satpura road in Dangs to enter hot springs for ritual purification
PARABAR
HOME COMING
suddhi
suddhi
FIRE
FAST
BATH
CHANT

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RESPONSE. That Hinduism is a non-proselytizing religion must be one of the best-preserved myths in history! The Arya Samaj made proselytizing one of their main programmes. Swami Shraddhanand's Shuddhi movement organized conversions of Muslims and Christians, but kept up the pretence that Hinduism was a non-proselytizing religion by labelling them 'reconversions'. Even earlier, Sri Chaitanya made many converts to Vaishnavism, including Muslims, in the sixteenth century.

Writing in late nineteenth century, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, a founding father of Indian sociology, noted that many poor 'patit' brahmans (literally, fallen brahmans, that is, priests who were ranked very low on the ritual ladder) often discovered a living among tribals by converting them and making themselves their priests.

Today the VHP has launched huge organized movements for conversion although they keep up the fiction of Hinduism as a non-proselytizing religion by calling them 'paravartan' or homecoming!

Conversion, it may be reiterated, involves a change of belief/identity freely chosen by individual/s and does not, therefore, amount to intolerance. On the other hand it is an act of intolerance to resist changes of belief in others. The VHP relies on intolerance in conversions by opposing conversions to other religions. They violently oppose conversion to 'foreign' religions such as Islam and Christianity. Their real agenda is to fence in Hindus like cattle in a stockade with themselves as a militia that will control the choices of Hindus through violence. How else can one account for their militant resistance to conversions to Buddhism, a religion that is by their definition 'Indian'? Faced with the prospect of mass conversion to Buddhism in the Ramlila grounds at Delhi, they condemned

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the ceremony saying that it was a Christian conspiracy!

There is another troublesome question. Can faith in Hinduism survive this onslaught on conversions? Faith loses its meaning and value, if it is preserved by force and law. If exit points are sealed off by fiat and government orders, it becomes a burden. By disallowing conversion to other faiths, Hinduism is rendered into a State diktat. It ceases to be the genuine, free conviction of its adherents.

GANDHI CONDEMNED CONVERSIONS. *Or did he?*

Sangh Parivar pamphlets often cite a passage from Gandhi that condemns conversions. Actually these pamphlets indulge in deliberate distortion. The passage from Gandhi is based on an interview that Gandhi gave to *The Hindu* on 22 March 1931, where he was said to have expressed the wish that in a self-governing India, missionaries would be asked to withdraw, since 'We need no converting spiritually.' Gandhi clarified this statement in *Young India* on 23 April 1931 (reprinted in *Collected Works*, Vol. XLVI, pp. 27–8) with a devastating comment, 'This is what a reporter has put into my mouth . . . All I can say is that it is a travesty of what I have always said and held.'

QUESTION. But shouldn't there be at least a debate on conversions, as Atalbehari Vajpayee has repeatedly stressed?

RESPONSE. Let us be clear. There can be only two possible points of debate:

- ✔ that conversions should be banned;
- ✔ that there should be a check on the way they are carried out;

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PATH OF NON-VIOLENCE
"We need no converting spiritually" 22,March, 1931 Hindu
"It is a travesty of what I have said and held" 23,April, 1931 Young India

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Let us take the implications of the first kind of debate. Article 25 (i) of the Fundamental Rights chapter of our Constitution guarantees the 'right to freedom of religion' which is defined as: 'all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion.' The 'right to propagate' logically implies freedom of voluntary conversion. In general these provisions are informed by the understanding that faith is a fundamental individual conviction, for it governs how we value, interpret, give meaning to life and death as well as to other beings and to ourselves. Any legislative ban by the State on conversions would restrict this fundamental freedom of belief and would represent an intolerable extension of State power into the most intimate areas of one's life.

To ban conversions would be morally wrong. After all, if a person believes that she has found the truth, it becomes necessary for that person to share that belief with others. Further, it is only by learning about other religions and beliefs that a person can make an informed decision on what faith to follow. The individual's ability to think, discern and choose her beliefs must be respected as a fundamental democratic right. To ban conversions therefore would amount to an attempt to smother our democracy. The right to conversions and democracy are inextricably interlinked. To have a debate on the banning of conversion is like inviting a national debate on doing away with democracy!

If the debate is to be about how illegitimate ways of proselytization ought to be regulated, then it seems utterly pointless. There are criminal laws that protect citizens from fraud and compulsion if these have been used to convert someone. Additional laws are unnecessary. And in the event of missionaries abusing other religions, this too can be dealt with under existing laws that make it a criminal offence.

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ORIYA Brahmin beautiful, fair, 25+, M.A. (English), 5'-5", only daughter, father G.M. (Fin.) Central Govt. Corp. one elder brother. Wanted handsome 27+, above 5'-7", well placed groom from cultured Oriya Brahmin family. Contact after 8 p.m. Phone: 033-
Match for Bengali Baidya, 30/5'1", beautiful, slim, convent-educated, graduate, P.G. Diploma Information Management, working at Delhi, from well-settled groom, cultured, Baidya/ Brahmin/ Kayastha family. Box (A) M 3514 Anandabazar Cal-700072.
able groom. Caste no bar. Ph: 2415-7154. Box (A) M
THEY TOOK IT ALL..
OH! LORD SAVE THE PRIDE OF OUR CASTE
EDUCATION FOR LOW CASTE

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QUESTION, If all this is true, then what is the Hindutva campaign against missionaries getting at?

RESPONSE. The belief that only those faiths that are born in India are authentic does not, as we have seen, get its strength from logic. It acquires it from certain perceived fears. The most important fear stems from the positive impact of Christianity, that is, its empowerment of low castes, tribals and women. The upper caste character of Hindutva makes it deeply suspicious and resentful of anything which can substantially help low caste/ tribal self-assertion and the questioning of gender discriminations in the family and society. It is this mindset, which inspired VHP leaders to attack the award of the Nobel Prize on the socially empowering economics of Amartya Sen—a source of pride for people of this country—as a Christian conspiracy.

The VHP also attacked Mother Teresa for her work among the most vulnerable sections of society. Let us also not forget that Graham Staines (who incidentally was not an ordained priest and could not, therefore, convert others) had to pay with his life and that of his children, for working among lepers. Incidentally, the RSS women's wing proudly declares that they run hostels in Nagpur for 'uninfected' girls from leper families. The contrast with Staines—who lived with his family among lepers—is striking.

The values and framework of our democracy have been undoubtedly imperfect, but it has also allowed an unparalleled growth in the social awareness and empowerment of large numbers of the unprivileged. Instead of making our democracy more empowering and accountable to the people of the country, Hindutva forces have been trying to undermine democracy altogether. Seeking a ban on conversions is of a piece with the attempt to push through a Presidential system of gov-

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VHP said the award of the Nobel Prize to Amartya Sen was a Christian conspiracy.

They also attacked Mother Teresa for her work. Graham Staines had to pay with his life and that of his children, for working among lepers.

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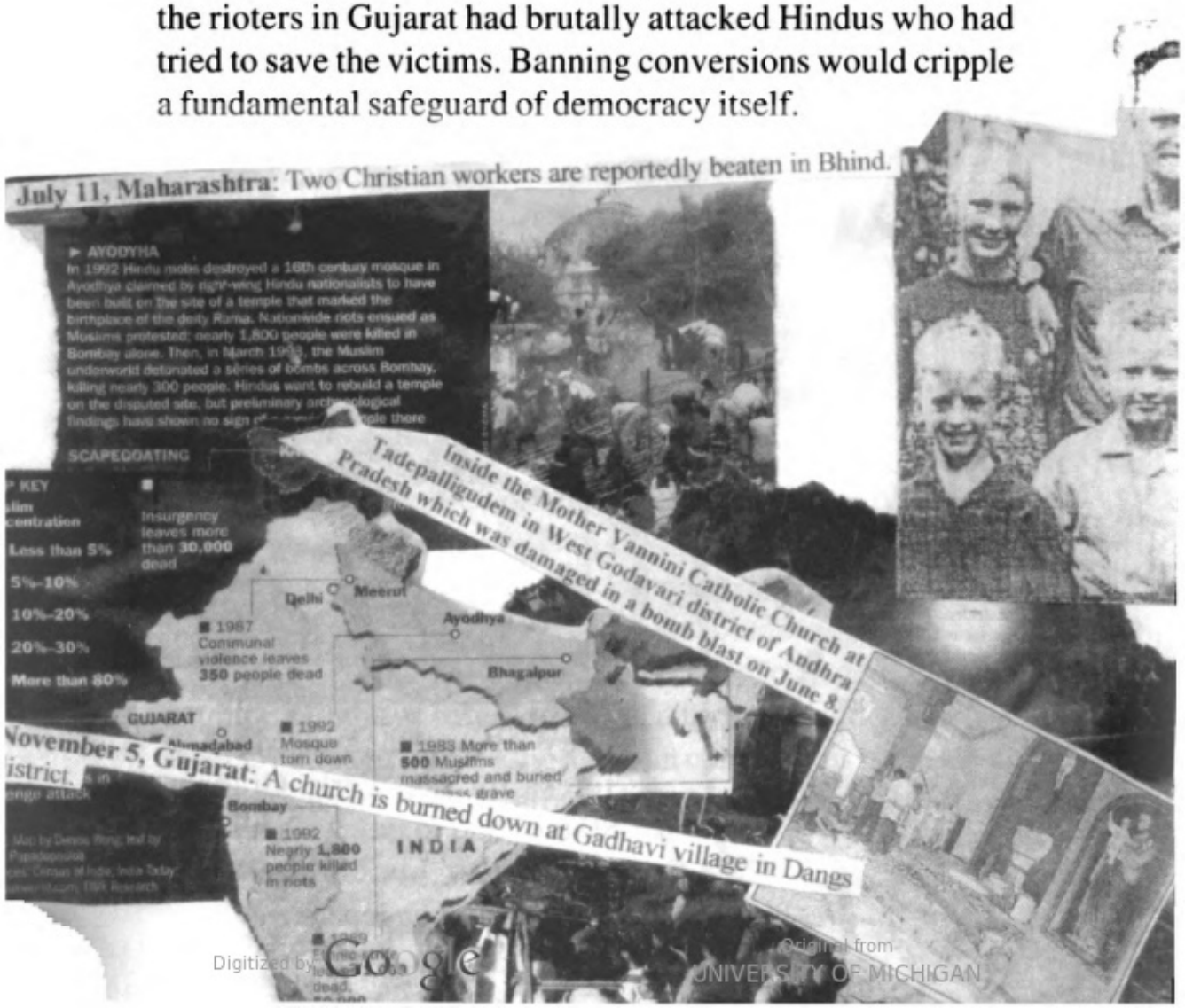
ernance. Banning conversions actually means that only Hindutva and the VHP will be allowed to conduct conversions. Equality of all religions is an essential ingredient of equal citizenship rights. Qualify that and you would have a crippled democracy.

Indeed, the desire to ban conversions stems from a fear of democracy. The pogrom in Gujarat has already shown the bloody and horrifying actions that a mindset antagonistic to minorities and to equal citizenship, can perpetrate. It may be recalled that the riots against Muslims in Gujarat were preceded by a sustained and violent campaign against Christians. To ban conversions would be to give legitimacy to this mindset. And once legitimized this mindset could extend its violence against everyone who upholds democracy, just as the rioters in Gujarat had brutally attacked Hindus who had tried to save the victims. Banning conversions would cripple a fundamental safeguard of democracy itself.


July 11, Maharashtra: Two Christian workers are reportedly beaten in Bhind.
► AYODYHA
SCAPEGOATING
KEY
Less than 5%
5%–10%
10%–20%
20%–30%
More than 80%
Insurgency leaves more than 30,000 dead
Delhi
Meerut
Ayodhya
Bhagalpur
1967 Communal violence leaves 350 people dead
GUJARAT
Ahmadabad
1992 Mosque torn down
1983 More than 500 Muslims massacred and buried
Bombay
1992 Nearly 1,800 people killed in riots
INDIA
Inside the Mother Vannini Catholic Church at Tadepalligudem in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh which was damaged in a bomb blast on June 8.
November 5, Gujarat: A church is burned down at Gadhavi village in Dangs

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DHARMAPRACHAR

[This is a somewhat edited, prose version of a poem written by Rabindranath Tagore. He wrote it in 1881 after reading a newspaper account of the incident represented here.]

In a Calcutta house; angry anti-missionaries mobilizing an attack.

Hey brothers, how can we bear the cry of 'Hail Jesu' in the streets? Let us listen instead to Yajnavalkyamuni, to Vishnu, Atree, Narada sobbing out their bloodied tears. Where have we left karma and sanatan dharma? Get up, awake, rouse your rage, save the shastras; tighten your shorts and dhotis, raise your lathis, defend our Hindu dharma, grind Christianity into the mud; where, where has our Hindu flag gone? If only it were here! We could have had a good time.

Come on, come on, Bhuto, Mono, put your shoes on, find a pretext, stamp that padre's foot and if he doesn't talk we'll fall on him—all twentyfive of us. You go after him, while I snatch off his cap. We'll throw him to the ground, the five of us, hack his hair, rip off his coat buttons!

The leader's whistle is heard. Bishu, Haru, Mono, Bhuto, clad in saffron, assemble on the road while the preacher sings his song.

Praise be to your love, praise be to your name, let a new Jerusalem dawn on us and hatred, contempt and cruelty disappear; Wipe away, O Lord, man's tears, gift life's rain to those that thirst!

The gang responds, anxiously.

Bhai Bishu, who's this guy, where are his shoes? I feel more confident looking at his saffron clothes.

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Addressing the preacher.

Arre, forget that Christ, get up on this stool, Father and chant 'Hare Kristo.'

The preacher chants.

I will bear my trials by remembering what you had borne. Give me suffering if another's sins are wiped out by my tears. I will give my life if the sinner gains his in return.

I've given everything up, my people, my country, happiness, society, a woman's love, the hug of a friend—I've cast them off holding this supreme, all for you.

Yet even now I cannot forget. Sometimes memories rise up in my soul and family ties try to drag me home. And then I gaze upon your bloodied face and in that love there is no division: foreign or native, there is no self, no other.

Let love's nectar sweeten a scowling face.

The gang, even more incensed.

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My Aryan blood burns, I can't take this any longer. Hey Haru! Hey Madhu! Use your lathis. Come on, let's hear you say 'Christ' again.

'Merciful Jesus Christ.'

That's enough. Come boys, tighten your waistbands, hit him on the head with your lathis, save Hindu dharma, stamp out Christianity!

Blood flows from the preacher's head as it is hit with lathis. Wiping the blood, he says:

May the Lord grant you wisdom in your pitiful state. I am just his lowly servant; He, the father of the universe.

Hey Shibu! Hey Haru! Arre Nani! Oi Charu! Is this a time to enjoy yourselves—don't you fear anything? Hurry, run, the cops are here and their butts are raised. Arya dharma be praised, praised be our Gaur!

They flee panting. Upon returning home.

We've hit a sahib. Where's Mejobou? Call her at once—get the chhola and luchi!

My blood still boils over.

God knows what I'll do if I don't get the luchis quickly!

Woman! Your husband comes home after battle and finds no luchi fried! Is this what you've learnt, you Aryan woman! You will be aptly punished.

We have to fight, save Hindu dharma. Where is our ancient pativrata, the great sanatan luchi chhola. All I bloody get is a child each year!

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